Leadership in Context
Impact of Leadership in the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections

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The 2014 Lok Sabha elections saw an effort by the Bharatiya Janata Party to project leadership as a key strategy in its campaign. The response of the electorate provided important indications of the effect of leadership on the outcome of elections in India. The effect of the leadership issue needs to be viewed in the context of a United Progressive Alliance government that was on the defensive and a Congress leadership that looked ineffective and directionless. These added weight to the BJP's projection of Narendra Modi as a decisive, effective and experienced leader.

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1 Approaching the Theme

The role of leadership in the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) securing a clear majority in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections has been the subject of much debate. Was the result a positive vote for a new leadership or an expression of no confidence in the incumbent government? This paper argues that leadership played a vital role in ensuring the BJP's victory. However, the importance of the leadership factor needs to be contextualised. A strong feeling of discontent against the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) in general and the Congress in particular played a vital role in the leadership factor working to the advantage of the BJP. This paper attempts to assess the effect and importance of leadership in the BJP's decisive victory.

There is an emerging body of literature that examines the effect of presidential-style leadership races in elections held in traditional parliamentary systems of government (Balmas et al 2014; Balmas and Sheafer 2010; Langer 2010, 2007; King 2002, 1985; Richards 2009; Shastri 2009; Hennessy 2007, 2000; Bean 1993; Harmel and Svasand 1993; Kavanagh 2000, 1990). Studies have focused on how many successful electoral campaigns have been fashioned on a "personal rather than a party reputation" (Carey and Shugart 1995: 417). Studies of party and regime change have argued that "new leaders" often make the decisive difference (Harmel et al 1995: 1; Harmel and Svasland 1993). The "prominent tone of the media" in projecting candidate attributes in an election and driving voter evaluation has been the focus of research (Balmas and Shaefer 2010: 204). Studies have stressed that "performance-relevant qualities of competence and integrity" play a critical role in leadership-based electoral decisions in parliamentary systems (Bean 1993: 132; Balmas et al 2014). In the Indian context, it has been pointed out that cultural and institutional factors could account for leadership playing a key role in influencing electoral outcomes (Chhibber and Verma 2014). The role of leadership in defining and determining electoral outcomes has thus been the focus of considerable academic attention. This paper draws on the relevant literature to assess the effect of leadership in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

2 Providing a Context

Over the last four general elections in India, the leadership factor has been central to election campaigns. The leaders of the two main alliances, the Congress and the BJP, have sought to gain the maximum political mileage from this factor, with of course different strategies and dramatically varying

outcomes. In 1999, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) came to power using Atal Bihari Vajpayee as its prime ministerial candidate and mascot (Shastri 2009). A repeat of the strategy in 2004 helped the BJP (and the NDA) garner votes, but the party and the alliance had to concede defeat and the Congress-led UPA formed the government. In the 2009 election, the BJP made every effort to make the leadership issue the key driver of its election campaign by projecting L K Advani as its prime ministerial candidate, and attempting to paint Prime Minister Manmohan Singh as incompetent, weak, and ineffective.[1] This strategy boomeranged when the Congress seized the opportunity to project Manmohan Singh as its prime ministerial candidate and wrest the advantage.

The 2014 Lok Sabha elections was held after the Congress-led UPA government completed a decade in power. After returning to power in 2009, the UPA was caught up in a range of controversies, involving corruption charges against its ministers, and a general policy paralysis in the government and leadership (of both the government and the party), which were clearly not able to inspire public confidence. As the 2014 election approached, the Congress in particular and the UPA in general seemed to lose the initiative and concede the advantage to the BJP. A turning point was the Gujarat assembly election of December 2012, when the BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi returned to power for a fourth term. Many believe that Modi's speech after the election victory was the first campaign speech for the 2014 Lok Sabha election. He departed from his normal practice of speaking in Gujarati and chose to reach out to a wider national audience in Hindi. Amid chants of "Modi for PM" by his supporters, he obliquely referred to a larger role by saying that the Gujarat result was a victory for "Indians who aspire for prosperity and development. This is a victory of all those who wish the country's good" (*Hindustan Times*, 21 December 2012).

Soon the campaign for a larger national role for Modi gained momentum in the BJP. Sensing an opportunity to seize the initiative from the Congress, the BJP appointed Modi as the chairman of its campaign committee for the 2014 Lok Sabha election in June 2013, close to a year before the election was due (*The Economic Times*, 10 June 2013). It went on to project him as its prime ministerial candidate in September 2013 (*Mint*, 14 September 2013). Modi's rise to this position was not without strong opposition in the party, especially among some key leaders.[2] Given the support of the rank and file of the party and its front organisations, the BJP leadership appeared to have no choice but to anoint Modi as its prime ministerial candidate. In the run-up to the elections, the BJP saw the advantage of projecting a prime ministerial candidate at a time the ruling UPA was clearly on the backfoot. The strong performance of the BJP in the state assembly elections held in December 2013 further helped its cause.[3] A reference was earlier made to elections in parliamentary systems being converted into presidential-style leadership contests (Balmas et al 2014; Langer 2010; King 2002). The BJP attempted something on these lines in the 2014 poll.

By declaring its prime ministerial candidate more than six months before the election, the BJP hoped to set the agenda for it and directly challenge the Congress on the leadership issue. The Congress found itself in a dilemma as its prime minister no longer inspired confidence, and the "young" face of the party, Rahul Gandhi, appeared to be a reluctant leader. While there was tremendous pressure on it to declare Rahul Gandhi as its prime ministerial candidate, the leadership was not willing to formalise the electoral battle as one between Rahul Gandhi and Modi. As late as February 2014, the Congress named party president Sonia Gandhi as the chair of its campaign committee, with Rahul Gandhi, the party vice president, as its co-chair. Just before this, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh made a formal announcement that he was retiring at the end of his term. The Congress was thus in an unenviable position – it was entering the Lok Sabha election campaign with a retiring prime minister and no other leader being projected as its prime ministerial candidate.

It is important to note that it is rare for a ruling party in a parliamentary system to face an election with a prime minister in retirement mode and no other leader formally projected as its choice for the top post. In most parliamentary systems, if a prime minister plans to retire, it is often done much before the election to give a new leader the opportunity to demonstrate his or her political capacities, and establish credentials to lead the party in the next election campaign.[4] From the leadership perspective, it was clearly advantage BJP, even as the campaign for the election began. A state chief minister emerging on the national scene and being projected as the future prime minister reflected the idea of "new" leaders making a critical difference in electoral contests (Harmel et al 1995).

It is estimated that from the date of being declared the BJP's prime ministerial candidate to the end of the campaign, Modi addressed 437 public rallies across 25 states, covering 3,00,000 kilometres, and 1,350 rallies through 3D technology (*The Times of India*, 1 May 2014). Unlike past election campaigns of the BJP, this time it was a one-man show, with all other prominent leaders of the party taking a backseat. It is interesting that the Congress leadership, which has often been accused of promoting a high command culture, criticised the BJP and Modi for this. Rahul Gandhi accused the BJP of believing in the "concentration of power in the hands of one person" (Reuters, 28 January 2014), which he felt was anti-democratic. We may keep in mind that many successful electoral contests have revolved around the persona of an individual rather than the record of a party (Carey and Shugart 1995). The high-decibel BJP campaign in 2014 went on the offensive and appeared to set the agenda, while the Congress appeared to be merely responding to issues raised by Modi and focusing on attacking his leadership style and record.[5]

3 Leadership Factor and 2014 Elections

To test the impact of leadership on the 2014 campaign and electoral outcome, the CSDS (Centre for the Study of Developing Societies)-Lokniti surveys (principally the National Election Study, or NES) conducted around the time of the elections are analysed. A range of questions, which specifically tapped respondents' views on leadership, are included for analysis.

(a) Preferred Prime Ministerial Choice

In the past three general elections, the NES posed a question on who the respondents preferred prime minister would be. In

the just concluded election, more than one-third of the respondents mentioned Modi and he had a 20 percentage point lead over the next most mentioned name, Rahul Gandhi. The two of them taken together were mentioned by half the respondents. In the 2009 election, Manmohan Singh was mentioned by around one in every five respondents. The BJP's Advani was 3 percentage points behind. In 2004, the respondents saw the contest as between two leaders, with four in 10 supporting Vajpayee and three in 10 favouring Sonia Gandhi. It is important to record that the support for Modi in 2014 was a few percentage points below what Vajpayee secured a decade earlier (Table 1). There is of course an important difference. Vajpayee was an incumbent prime minister while Modi was an aspiring prime minister.

The mention of Modi for prime ministership by survey respondents increased noticeably after he was made chairman of the campaign committee and peaked after he was named as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate (Table 1). It is important to note that Modi maintained a 20 percentage point lead over Rahul Gandhi after this. The level of support for both Modi

Figure 1: States Where Support for Narendra Modi as Prime Minister Was High

All figures are in percentage and rounded off; the data is weighted.
Source: Lokniti, CSDS-IBN NES 2014 post-poll study.

Table 1: Preferred Choice for Prime Minister (2004 to 2014)

|	April–May 2014 Post-Poll	March 2014	January 2014	July 2013	2011	2009 Post-Poll	2004 Post-Poll
Narendra Modi	36	34	34	19	5	2	–
Rahul Gandhi	14	15	15	12	19	6	1
Sonia Gandhi	3	3	5	5	10	16	29
Manmohan Singh	2	2	3	6	10	18	–
Atal Behari Vajpayee	–	–	–	–	4	3	40
L K Advani	–	–	–	2	15	–	–

All figures are in percentage and rounded off; all names mentioned are not included, and the data is weighted.
Source: NES and surveys conducted by Lokniti–CSDS and associated organisations in various years between 2004 and 2014.

and Rahul Gandhi did not change in any significant measure in the months preceding the election, clearly implying that the crystallisation of popular opinion on the leadership issue had taken place well in advance of the election.

It is also relevant to note that the support for Modi as prime minister was much higher than the national average in the 13 states where the BJP did well (Figure 1). While the BJP-ruled states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat are on this list, it also includes critical states, such as Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand, where the party did exceptionally well.

Did support for Modi vary across different socio-economic groups (Figure 2)? It is noticed that it was significantly high among the socially and economically privileged[6] (Table 3, p 80). More than half of those from the upper castes preferred Modi as prime minister. The support declined if one looked at the preferences of dalits and Muslims. Similarly, the upper and middle classes were more likely to opt for Modi than the poor and lower classes. Half of those with high media exposure favoured Modi, and support for him fell as media exposure declined. First-time voters were enthusiastic about backing Modi, and this fell as one moved to older age groups. Support for Modi was the strongest in central and west India, and much lower in south and east India. Thus the intensity of the support for Modi appeared to be
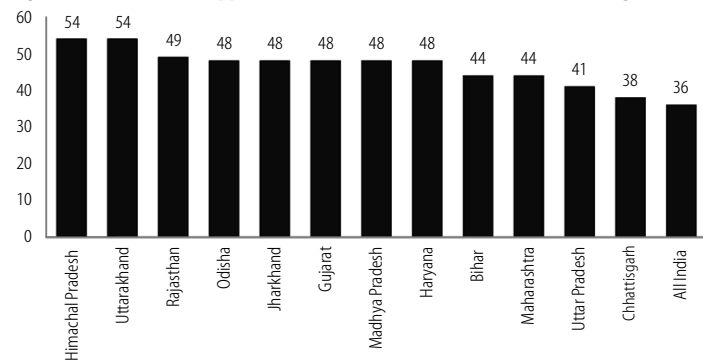
directly linked to the support that the party enjoyed across regions, socio-economic groups, and different age groups.

The effect of the leadership factor can also be assessed by looking at the support for Modi as prime minister in different types of electoral/party contests. For this, we grouped the states into three categories – BJP ruled, strong BJP presence, and weak BJP presence (Table 2, p 80).[7] We notice that the level of support for Modi as prime minister varies significantly across these three categories. If support for Modi and other non-BJP leaders as prime minister is taken into account, four in 10 supported Modi

Figure 2: Predicted Probability, Preference for Modi as Prime Minister
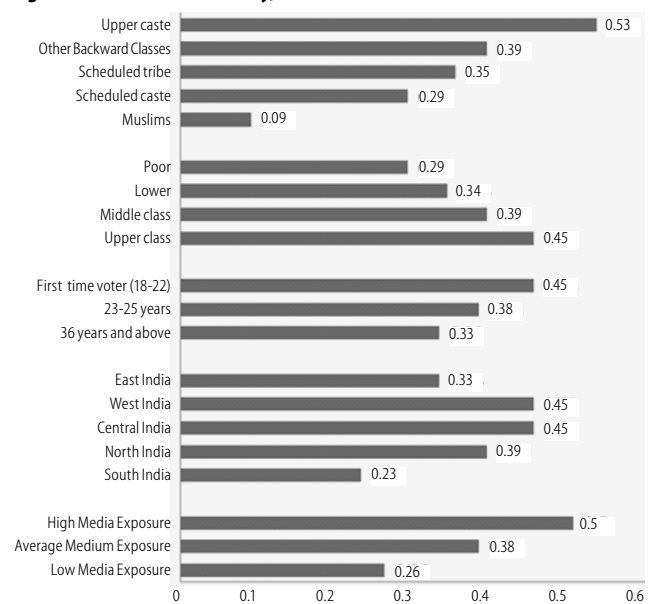
Source: Lokniti, CSDS-IBN NES 2014 post-poll study.

in states where the BJP had a strong presence, but was not in power.[8] This rose by 4 percentage points in BJP-ruled states. In BJP-weak states, it plummeted to 15%. This implies that support for Modi against other non-BJP leaders for prime minister was marginally higher in BJP-ruled states and clearly lower in BJP-weak states. The high reference to Modi in BJP-ruled states could also be a consequence of the party being in power.

(b) Leadership Qualities and Their Influence

Studies in parliamentary systems have focused on the importance of leadership qualities such as competence and integrity

influencing electoral decisions (Bean 1993; Balmas et al 2014). The NES 2014 had a battery of questions that sought responses on which leader in the current election could be thought of as caring, trustworthy/reliable, capable of getting things done,

Table 2: Preferred Prime Minister Choice, Modi vs Other Non-BJP Leaders

Prime Minister Choice	BJP Ruled	Strong BJP Presence	Weak BJP Presence
Narendra Modi	46	41	15
Other non-BJP leaders	32	34	38
Don't know	22	25	48

Source: Lokniti, CSDS-IBN NES 2014 post-poll study.

taking other leaders along, and being experienced. Modi scored the highest on all indicators and had a minimum 25 percentage point lead over the second name mentioned – Rahul Gandhi (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Leadership Qualities, Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi
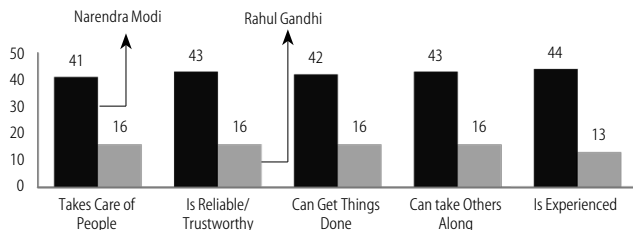
All figures are in percentage and rounded off; The data is weighted.
Source: Lokniti, CSDS-IBN NES 2014 post-poll study.

How did the voters rate political parties in terms of their leadership? When asked which party had a good leadership, more than seven of 10 who voted for the BJP endorsed it as the best for leadership. When it came to the Congress, those who voted for it were not as confident of the leadership capacities of those in the party.

(c) Did the Declaration of BJP's Prime Ministerial Candidate Affect the Result?

If Modi were not the BJP's prime ministerial candidate, would the voting have varied? This question was posed as part of the NES 2014. Close to one-fourth said that their vote preference would have changed if Modi were not the BJP's prime ministerial nominee. In the case of those who voted for the BJP, close to three in 10 said that their voting preference would have changed. In states where the BJP was the ruling party, this percentage dropped marginally, and in states where BJP had a strong presence but was not in power, it rose by 2 percentage points. It is important to highlight that in states where the BJP had a weak presence, close to three in 10 of those who voted for the BJP said that they would have altered their choice if Modi was not the prime ministerial candidate.

The implication of this is important. A much higher percentage of BJP voters in states where it had a weak presence and where it had a strong presence but was not in power stated that they would not have voted for the BJP if Modi was not the party's prime ministerial candidate. A higher percentage of BJP supporters would have voted for the party in states where it was in power even if Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate. The real difference of Modi's candidature seemed to be in states where the BJP had a strong presence but was not in power, and in states where it had a weak presence.

The effect of the Modi factor in states where the BJP was not in power can also be discerned when an analysis is done

state-wise. In many states, a much higher percentage of those who voted for the BJP stated that they would have changed their voting preference if Modi was not the prime ministerial candidate. This included Bihar, Karnataka, Assam, Haryana, and Delhi, where the party did well. In Karnataka, six of 10 who voted for the BJP stated that they would have changed their party choice if Modi was not the prime ministerial candidate. In Bihar and Rajasthan, four of 10 respondents took this stand.

Table 3: If Modi Were Not the Prime Ministerial Candidate Would You Have Changed Your Voting Preference?

	Overall	Voted for BJP			
		Overall	BJP Ruled	Strong BJP Presence	Weak BJP Presence
Would have voted for some other party	22	28	25	30	29
Made no difference	49	51	53	50	40
Don't know	29	21	22	20	30

All figures in percentage and rounded off; data is weighted.
Source: Lokniti, CSDS-IBN NES 2014 post-poll study.

Even in states such as Tamil Nadu and West Bengal, where the BJP expanded its presence, a significant chunk (higher than the national average) of those who voted for the BJP stated that their party choice would have been different if Modi was not the candidate for prime minister. In some key battleground states, the projection of Modi worked to the advantage of the party and contributed to its victory. However, the picture in UP and Bihar was different. Here support for BJP seemed high even if Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate. In UP, more than three-fourths, and in Maharashtra, more than two-thirds of those who said that they would vote for the BJP, said that Modi not being the prime ministerial candidate made no difference to whom they voted for. Given the organisational base of the BJP (and its allies) in these two states, the Modi factor seems to have had only an incremental effect.

(d) How Critical Was Leadership?

To understand which factor drove voter choice, a regression analysis was undertaken (Table 4) of all the factors discussed above – (a) preference for Modi as prime minister; (b) leadership skills; (c) prime minister choice in BJP-ruled states; (d) prime minister choice in strong BJP presence states; (e) party better for good leadership; and (f) if Modi were not the prime ministerial candidate, would people have voted differently.

Table 4: Regression Analysis of Vote for BJP with Leadership Variables and States

Variables	Coefficients	Std Error
Constant	0.108**	0.017
v1-Preference for PM candidate	0.246**	0.012
v2-Leadership index[9]	0.027**	0.001
v3-BJP-ruled states	0.129**	0.015
v3-Strong BJP presence	0.047**	0.013
v4-BJP is better for good leadership	0.347**	0.011
v4-Congress is better for good leadership	–0.015	0.011
v5-Not voting for the BJP if Modi is not the candidate	-0.020*	0.008

Dependent variable: vote for BJP; reference variable for v3: other states; reference variable for v4: other parties; ** p value < 0.01, * p value < 0.05.

The regression analysis permits an assessment of each of the variables, while controlling for all the others. For the variable preference for Modi as the prime ministerial candidate, the regression table shows that respondents who preferred him as

prime minister (compared to other non-BJP candidates) tended to vote for the BJP. This of course was on expected lines. The leadership index variable is positive and significant, which shows that respondents who viewed Modi as a leader who is caring, reliable, efficient, inclusive, and experienced tended to vote for the BJP.[10] While controlling for all other variables, in BJP-ruled states (compared to other states), the respondents tended to vote for the BJP. While controlling for all other variables, in states where the BJP had a strong presence but was not in power (compared to states where it was weak), the respondents tended to vote for the BJP, but were less likely to vote for it than in BJP-ruled states. Both these variables show a significant result in the regression.

While analysing which party is better in terms of providing good leadership (the BJP is better; the Congress is better; some other party is better), respondents who felt the BJP was better at providing good leadership (compared to other parties), tended to vote for it.[11] However, it is important to note that one does not get a significant result for respondents who say that the Congress was better at providing good leadership (compared to other parties). The coefficient value for the last variable is negative, which shows that had Modi not been projected as the prime ministerial candidate, the respondents were more likely to have voted for some other party.

The regression table shows that the most significant variable appears to be the one that talks of the BJP as the preferred party for its good leadership, followed by the preferred prime ministerial candidate.

4 Summing Up

The BJP's strategy of declaring its prime ministerial candidate several months before the election provided the party an advantage over its principal rival, the Congress. The BJP consciously crafted its entire electoral campaign around Modi's personality. The data clearly shows that the leadership factor played a role, but there is no conclusive evidence to prove that this was the decisive factor. It must also be asserted that the success achieved by the BJP in projecting its leadership was also linked to the lacklustre performance of the party that it was challenging.[12] With the UPA II on the defensive and a Congress leadership that seemed ineffective and directionless, the BJP's projection of its leadership as decisive, effective, and experienced acquired added weight. Much of what is seen as positive is often contextual. When what was ranged against the BJP was seen to be hopelessly wanting in competence and capacity, the party appeared to score points not exclusively for what it and its leadership represented, but for what it was pitted against. The BJP's victory had much to do with a well-planned, leader-driven campaign. But it also had a lot to do with an uninspiring and ineffective ruling coalition and the leadership that was ranged against it.

NOTES

1 The BJP's election manifesto opens with "Determined Leader and Decisive Government". The focus on leadership was patently visible in the party's campaign strategy (Shastri 2009).

2 Senior BJP leader and its prime ministerial candidate in the 2009 elections, L K Advani, openly expressed his opposition to the decision of the BJP, both when Modi was made chairman of the campaign committee and when he was declared the prime ministerial candidate of the party. He refused to attend the meeting of the national executive of the BJP at Goa, at which Modi was declared as the chairman of the campaign committee and resigned from all main forums of the party as he was not able to "reconcile either with the current functioning of the party or the direction in which it is going" (*The Times of India*, 11 June 2013). While he later withdrew his resignation, he continued to express his reservations on the lack of collective leadership in the party and refused to attend the meeting of the parliamentary board that declared Modi as the prime ministerial candidate. Advani became the main symbol of the dissent in the party and he was supported by some of the other top leaders in the party, including Sushma Swaraj, Jaswant Singh, and Yashwant Sinha, among others.

3 Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Delhi, and Mizoram went to the polls and the BJP won in the first three and emerged as the single largest party in Delhi. Mizoram was the only state the Congress was able to retain. These were the last major elections before the 2014 Lok Sabha poll.

4 Examples from the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand can be cited.

5 In one of his last appeals, Modi urged voters to "throw out the scandal-plagued Congress Party from power" (*Hindustan Times*, 12 May 2014).

6 This is in consonance with the nature of support enjoyed by the BJP in the 2014 election where the socially and economically privileged supported it more than the economically less privileged and the lower castes.

7 BJP ruled: Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Rajasthan (Punjab is included as the BJP is in power with an ally). Strong BJP presence: Andhra Pradesh (excluding Telangana), Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Bihar, Delhi, Jharkhand, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, and Uttarakhand.

8 This implies those who opted for a BJP leader other than Modi (marginal) are not included in the analysis.

9 The leadership index is created by combining Z scores for five questions linked to the characteristics of a leader and who the respondents felt had those qualities; Modi =1, others=0. Z-score is a statistical measurement of a score's relationship to the mean in a group of scores. It is also used by analysts to convert scores from different variables into scores that can be accurately compared to each other, which it does by standardising the mean of different variables so that they can be compared.

10 Dummy variables have been created for each of these categories and included in the analysis. The two dummy variables included in the analysis are "BJP-ruled states" and "BJP presence states". The reference category is "other states" (which are neither ruled by the BJP, nor have a strong BJP presence).

11 Similar to the previous variable, dummy variables for all three categories were created and included in the regression.

12 A recent comment by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief that the BJP victory was because "people wanted change during the elections" (*Free Press Journal*, 12 August 2014) assumes significance in this context.

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